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Allied Attitudes Toward the Strategic Defense Initiative

Summary

The Allies credit the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) with helping bring the Soviets back to the negotiating table. They generally support the agreement reached between President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher that work on SDI be limited to research and that later efforts be subject to arms control negotiations with the USSR. They have moderated their earlier opposition, apparently concluding that so long as SDI remains only a research project, outright criticism would only deepen strains within the Alliance unnecessarily. West German Chancellor Kohl publicly has called for Allied participation in SDI research. The Japanese have also adopted a cautiously pro-SDI attitude. [redacted]

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At the same time, the West Europeans remain concerned about the impact of SDI on their security interests, and differences are beginning to develop between NATO's nuclear and nonnuclear Allies that could complicate the search for consensus within the Alliance. Most of the Allies worry about the potential for the decoupling of the US strategic deterrent, and they all continue to have doubts about the technological feasibility of the project. The British and French still worry about what they see as the negative impact of SDI on their independent nuclear deterrent forces. The other Allies, led by the West Germans and Italians, do not appear concerned about this, and they may even look to SDI as a way to reduce the distinction between NATO's nuclear and nonnuclear members. Moreover, they appear fascinated with the prospect that they may achieve some benefits by participating in the research. [redacted]

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For the moment, West European leaders are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. The strategy behind this approach is to concentrate on trying to influence development of the program to meet their concerns. Their positions will in part be determined by public opinion and domestic politics, which so far have not made an issue of SDI. They also increasingly will press for close consultations and for the development of a common Alliance position in order to counter Soviet wedge-driving tactics. In our view, the West Europeans will also closely monitor the Japanese position toward SDI for fear that a special US-Japanese relationship on SDI will develop. [REDACTED]

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As SDI becomes more of a reality and the basis of deterrence changes to include both defensive and offensive components, the Allies will face difficult decisions regarding the form and extent of their participation. A key question will be whether to concentrate primarily on cooperation with the United States or to develop a semi-independent European SDI capability. [REDACTED]

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Public opinion in Allied capitals has not yet become fully engaged in addressing the SDI issue. Allied governments are concerned, however, that as arms talks begin, the Soviets will launch a propaganda campaign designed to exploit public ignorance about the purposes and effects of SDI. They therefore will expect the United States to flesh out the Reagan/Thatcher agreement in order to counter Soviet efforts. [REDACTED]

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Introduction

The Allies continue to share a fear that development of an effective SDI could decouple Europe from the American security guarantee, but there are important national differences within Western Europe. The British, and especially the French, are most concerned. In addition to the potential decoupling aspects of the initiative, London and Paris believe a successful strategic defense program--and Soviet efforts to match it--could undermine the credibility of their independent nuclear deterrent forces and reduce domestic support for expensive modernization programs. On the other hand, other Allies almost certainly believe that a successful SDI, by adding a defensive element to deterrence, might undercut the role of offensive nuclear weapons--thereby blurring the distinction between NATO's nuclear and nonnuclear powers and reducing the relative influence of the United Kingdom and France in European and Atlantic forums. [REDACTED]

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According to reporting from the US Ambassador to NATO, there is broad Allied support for Secretary General Carrington's efforts to move the Alliance

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toward a more coordinated and positive SDI position based on the four points agreed to at Camp David. The Allies apparently believe that agreement will give their governments ammunition to defend SDI against Soviet efforts to undermine it. Parliaments and publics reportedly have not yet become fully engaged in addressing the SDI issue. If they do, they will provide key elements in determining government position. Allied governments therefore will expect the United States to flesh out the Camp David approach, in particular to fulfill the commitment to negotiation. [redacted]

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The United Kingdom

In the wake of the Camp David agreements, the British undoubtedly believe they have played and will continue to play a particularly important role in shaping US positions on SDI. British officials undoubtedly interpret the Camp David points as having two key aspects: SDI research will continue, but deployments will not proceed without an agreement with the USSR in conformity with the 1972 ABM treaty. [redacted]

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The British will take great pains to avoid public differences with the United States on SDI and will use their influence with other Allies to convince them to do likewise. We nevertheless expect them to use every opportunity to reaffirm publicly their interpretation of the Camp David agreements, and they will want the United States to support them. [redacted]

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In view of the close ties between the United States and the United Kingdom, the British may hope that the United States will share new strategic defensive technologies with them. Thatcher has a scientific background, and we expect her to play a more active role than other Allied leaders in assessing the feasibility of SDI technology and its applicability to European defense. [redacted]

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Despite their efforts to mute differences and their interest in the technological aspects of SDI, the British remain skeptical of the program. Thatcher, for example, reportedly is convinced that full-scale development and deployment of a strategic defense system would bring no lasting benefits and would leave West Europe more vulnerable to the USSR. The British will want assurances that plans to modernize the US strategic nuclear arsenal will be carried out, both as evidence that the United States remains committed to the concept of nuclear deterrence and to use as ammunition to bolster domestic support for their own modernization efforts. [redacted]

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France

French officials have given mixed signals recently on SDI. Mitterrand clearly is on record as opposing SDI because of the threat it poses to their nuclear deterrent. [redacted]

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The French are concerned that SDI reflects a shift in the American strategy of deterrence from a balance of offensive systems to an emphasis on

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defensive weapons. President Mitterrand and others also have expressed a belief that SDI will promote a renewed arms competition between the superpowers in the area of defense against ballistic missiles. At a 9-10 February meeting of Alliance defense specialists in Munich, Defense Minister Hernu said that the SDI program contained "real risks of instability." Moreover, the French are concerned that the Soviet Union will develop a comparable system designed to defend against incoming US missiles but which also would prevent French missiles from reaching their targets.

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The French also are concerned about the difficulty of maintaining public support for strategic nuclear modernization in the face of a strategy that appears designed to eliminate the need for nuclear weapons. Paris is satisfied for the present, because the United States is seen as reasonable and willing to negotiate. The US Embassy reports, however, that the French still are concerned that the debate over SDI could threaten the fragile public acceptance of nuclear weapons in Europe while INF deployments still are under way.

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At the same time, however, French officials do not believe SDI ever will be completely successful. Hernu, for example, recently told a press interviewer that the United States and the USSR could not successfully build impenetrable defenses and that nuclear weapons would provide the basis for French security into the next century. Presidential adviser Hubert Vedrine made the same point in conversation with a US Embassy official. He said that he was not concerned about the threat SDI poses to the French nuclear deterrent because neither the Soviets nor the United States could build a complete shield that would prevent all warheads from reaching their targets. Both officials have stated publicly that the French deterrent will be sufficiently enhanced—at least through the end of the century—by the addition of penetration aids to new missiles.

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While the official French position remains one of opposition, there are some indications that their attitude has moderated somewhat in recent weeks. The US Embassy in Paris reports that the French recognize that SDI is a long-term program involving years of research before deployment decisions could be made. The French apparently have accepted the need for research as a prudent hedge against Soviet efforts to improve their strategic forces. Paris does, however, expect the SDI to continue to be the subject of arms control negotiations, with the hope that deployments will be limited or avoided entirely.

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Despite their concerns, according to the US Embassy in Rome, the French agreed with the Italians in January to support the United States in future negotiations and to keep any disagreements within "the NATO family" in order to prevent Soviet wedge-driving tactics. In our view, they are likely, however, to initiate diplomatic steps to convince the other Allies of the

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continued need for independent British and French nuclear deterrent forces. We also believe the French will use meetings of the Western European Union, as well as the European Space Agency, to try to shape an independent European attitude on SDI and on space issues in general. [redacted]

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West Germany

West German government officials reportedly are divided over SDI policy. [redacted] Chancellor Kohl and most of his Chancellery advisers favor the US decision to continue research and development of defenses against ballistic missiles. At the 9-10 meeting of high-level defense officials in Munich, for instance, Kohl publicly called for West European participation in SDI research and praised the moral basis of the program. [redacted]

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While Woerner's stated doubts about the technical feasibility and decoupling aspects of SDI may remain, Woerner has adopted a more positive view of SDI during the past few months. [redacted]

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Those officials favoring SDI may see several advantages resulting from West German support of the initiative. They almost certainly believe that if SDI is successful, it would reduce the role of British and French nuclear forces in Western deterrence strategy and also reduce the distinction between the United Kingdom and France--as nuclear powers--and the other European members of NATO. Moreover, to the extent that SDI technology is both applicable to Europe and based on conventional or laser weapons, it presents opportunities for direct West German participation in strategic deterrence--which is denied now because Bonn is prohibited from producing nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Moreover, they probably believe that participating in the research stage will give them a voice in shaping SDI policies. [REDACTED]

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We expect, therefore, that the Kohl government will keep an open mind about SDI and some level of West German participation in SDI research in order to benefit from the technological fallout. Like the British, the West Germans will avoid public criticism but will try to shape the program to protect their security interests. [REDACTED]

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Italy

According to a report from the US defense attache in December, official Italian thinking on SDI was not fully developed, and the attitude in Rome still appeared to be "wait-and-see." Among the most often expressed concerns was cost. According to the attache, some officials fear that if SDI proves to be as expensive as some estimate it will be, a US commitment to strategic defense could result in a weakened US commitment to Europe. They also fear that if the United States and the USSR deploy complete SDI systems, Europe might prove to be a battleground in a superpower conflict. [REDACTED]

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We also believe that Italian defense and arms control specialists may share many of the views of their West German counterparts who support SDI. The Italians, like the West Germans, would not be concerned if a successful SDI, by adding a defensive element to strategic deterrence, helped reduce the distinction between NATO's nuclear and nonnuclear powers. They also will keep an open mind to participation in SDI in order to help ensure that Italy benefits from the technology. [REDACTED]

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Italian public support for nuclear deterrence traditionally has been weak--as was indicated by polls showing that among the basing countries, public opposition to INF was highest in Italy. Public opinion in Italy may therefore be more receptive to an SDI public relations program than in other countries. [REDACTED]

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Other NATO Allies

Of the other West Europeans, the Dutch are the most concerned about SDI. According to the US Embassy in The Hague, in addition to the concerns they share with other Allies about decoupling, the Dutch are worried the issue could complicate a decision on INF deployment which--according to their own

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deadline--must be made by 1 November. On the one hand, they reportedly worry that US refusal to negotiate seriously and/or quickly on SDI will cause the Soviets to react the same way concerning INF arms control. On the other hand, the Dutch also fear that superpower preoccupation with strategic offensive and defensive systems will cause them to neglect INF. Both alternatives present opportunities for the Soviets to resume propaganda efforts in the Netherlands and could damage prospects for a favorable deployment decision. [redacted]

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Canada's External Affairs Secretary Clark told Parliament on 5 February that Ottawa will not help develop the SDI. He hopes this statement will ease opposition criticism of the government's backing of SDI research. His remarks also indicate the limits of Canadian support. The Norwegians and Danes have, however, advocated a clearer and more consistent Alliance public relations strategy for dealing with SDI. [redacted]

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Japan

The disarmament question, including the SDI, figured prominently in the US-Japanese Summit talks on 2 January. In his session with the President, Prime Minister Nakasone expressed full support for the research phase of SDI based on his understanding that, as a purely defensive nonnuclear weapon system, it would strengthen free world security and lead to the abolition of nuclear weapons. He also expressed his expectation that the United States would proceed concurrently with negotiations on INF and START. In addition, Nakasone requested that Japan be provided with progress reports on SDI research and consulted prior to any deployments. Press reports indicate the Prime Minister believed it would strengthen the US hand in upcoming talks with Gromyko if he echoed the commitment voiced two weeks earlier by Thatcher. [redacted]

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Nakasone, however, was sensitive to possibly dangerous domestic political repercussions as indicated by his rapid shift toward more muted backing for the US initiative:

- At the more open plenary meeting on 2 January, he confined himself to stating he "fully understood" the US position.
- At his press conference the following day, he expressed only "understanding and appreciation," while saying he intended to take a very prudent approach to SDI.
- By his press conference on 6 January, the Prime Minister had retreated one step farther to simple "understanding" accompanied by an explicit denial that he had given full support to the overall SDI concept. [redacted]

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Here the retreat ended and, as of early February, the Japanese government's position appears to have stabilized. Opposition parties and the press have attacked SDI as promoting the arms race and have charged that Nakasone's support is contrary both to Japan's focus on strict self-defense

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and to a Diet resolution against the military use of space. Even so, the outcry has been limited, and one of the moderate opposition parties has broken ranks and sided with Nakasone. Moreover, other issues are moving to center stage: trade tensions with the United States and the impending breach in the 1-percent-of-GNP limit on defense spending. We believe, therefore, that Tokyo will continue to provide low-key, qualified endorsement for SDI research—somewhat less positive than the British, much more positive than the French. Endorsement, however, will continue to be premised on a strong linkage to the US-Soviet arms control talks and US willingness to consult fully with Japan.

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Outlook

The Allies probably do not expect a formal linkage in the US-Soviet arms control talks between negotiations on offensive and defensive systems because of the difficulties in negotiating on a research program. At a minimum, however, they will expect continued respect for the ABM treaty and more frequent consultations to insure that Allied views and security needs are incorporated into US thinking. The Allies probably also hope that the superpowers will actively pursue an agreement to reduce strategic offensive arms so that if deployment of defensive systems became feasible, it would not lead to a new arms race—either in offensive or defense weapons.

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If SDI becomes more of a reality and the basis of deterrence changes to include a defensive component, the Allies will face difficult decisions regarding the extent of their participation in SDI. They clearly will not want to be left behind, but will be concerned about the costs. They almost certainly will seek assistance—either from the United States or through a cooperative European effort. The French, because they value so highly their independence, probably would favor a European effort in which they could play the leading role, and we believe that recent French promotion of European space ventures is a step in this direction. The other Allies, especially the British, probably would not oppose the French but also would seek cooperation with the United States.

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Another factor influencing Allied attitudes toward SDI will be the position of Japan. The West Europeans know Japan is a leader and competitor in the technological field and have been concerned about indications that Washington may shift its priorities to the Pacific Basin.

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The Nakasone government has been publicly more supportive of SDI than many of the major NATO Allies. If this continues, West European fears of being left out of a special Washington-Tokyo relationship on SDI would increase. The Allies therefore can be expected increasingly to explain their concerns to the Japanese and to attempt to enlist Japanese support. French and West German defense officials will be in Tokyo in February and March for

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bilateral talks, and Tokyo expects SDI arms control to be one of the topics.

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